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ABSTRACT

Smaller families in general (including the one-child option) are becoming more popular. This ERIC Digest focuses on changing trends in family size, reasons for choosing to have only one child, differences between only children and those with siblings, and the advantages of being an only child. Changing family patterns, economic concerns, and new roles for women are cited among the reasons for choosing to have only one child. Investigation results are briefly discussed regarding the only child and the following variables: intelligence, achievement, affiliation, peer popularity, and self-esteem. It is concluded that parents who chose to have only one child gain reduced conflict in dividing time and attention among children, greater financial flexibility, and a more closely knit family unit. (RH)

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ERIC Digest

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The Only Child

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Popular thinking often paints an unflattering picture of only children, portraying them as self-centered, attention-seeking, dependent, and temperamental. Despite these negative stereotypes, smaller families in general—and the one-child option—are growing in popularity. This Digest focuses on changing trends in family size, reasons for choosing to have only one child, differences between only children and those with siblings, and advantages of being an only child.

How Have Trends in Family Size Changed?

Recent figures from the National Center for Health Statistics indicate that the fertility rate for the entire American population has declined. Whereas families in 1970 averaged 2.5 children, families today average 1.8. The figures additionally show a strong general trend away from large families and an increase in the percentage of families having only one child: In 1970, 18% of American families had only children, as compared with 21% in 1981 (Kline 1984).

Why Are More Parents Choosing to Have One Child?

Changing family patterns, economic concerns, and new roles for women may contribute to parents' choosing the one-child option:

Changing family patterns. Divorce rates (higher than ever before) and the tendency for couples to marry later in life may contribute to shorter marriages and potentially fewer children.

Economic concerns. Inflation and high unemployment, contributing to reduced family income, may encourage parents to have smaller families.

New roles for women. The majority of women are now employed before they have children. The benefits of this added income and involvement in careers may lead women to postpone childbearing and bear fewer children.

Are Only Children Different from Children Who Have Siblings?

Research on intelligence, achievement, affiliation, popularity, and self-esteem suggests that many popular beliefs about the only child are unfounded (Falbo 1983b). The results of some of these investigations are briefly summarized below:

Intelligence. Although report findings conflict, only children, like first-borns, generally have been found to score slightly higher on measures of intelligence than younger siblings. Diverging results of intelligence research may be explained by focusing on factors within the family unit that affect intellectual development. Such experiences might include, for example, parents' provision of an "enriched" intellectual environment.

Achievement. As is the case for intelligence, achievement (both academic and other kinds) in only and first-born children appears to be slightly greater than for later-born children. To explain this phenomenon, theorists have considered the specific relationship between parents and children. Presumably, achievement motivation originates in the high standards for mature behavior that parents impose on their only and first-born children.

Affiliation. Some research indicates that only children may be slightly less affiliative than their peers. Specific research findings have shown that only children may belong to fewer organizations, have fewer friends, and lead a less intense social life. However, these investigations have additionally noted that only children have a comparable number of close friends, assume leadership positions in clubs, and feel satisfied and and happy with their lives.

Peer popularity. Research on the popularity of only children also has been mixed. Some findings suggest that, because only and first-born children have no older siblings with whom to interact, they acquire a more autocratic and less cooperative interactive style than do other children. Other research has indicated that likability ratings from same-sex grade school classmates are highest for only and last-born children. Again, researchers speculate that parents may play a role in the development of behaviors influencing peer popularity.

Self-esteem. Like peer popularity studies, investigations of self-esteem in the only child have netted mixed results. Different investigations have variously indicated that each of these groups (first-borns, last-borns,

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and only children) possesses the highest level of self-esteem. Consistent findings may prove possible if further consideration is given to the types of self-esteem measures used, the age of the subjects, and parental and sibling contributions to the development of self-esteem.

Are There Any Advantages to Being an Only Child?

Most current data appear to indicate that only children have a slight edge over children with siblings on measures of intelligence and achievement—and that they suffer no serious interpersonal deficits. In fact, only children may have some advantages as a result of their special status: more attention from parents, freedom from sibling rivalry and comparison, and access to more family resources, to name a few.

What Can Parents Gain from Choosing the One-Child Option?

Reduced conflict in dividing time and attention among children, greater financial flexibility, and a more closely knit family unit may encourage many parents to limit their families to one child.

FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

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